HEADLINE:

BYLINE: FORTUNE MOYO, KUDZAI MAZVARIRWOFA

EDITOR:

TRANSLATOR, LOCAL LANGUAGE TO ENGLISH: N/A

RESEARCHER:

FACT CHECKER:

TRANSLATOR, ENGLISH TO LOCAL LANGUAGE: N/A

COPY EDITOR:

PHOTO EDITOR:

Narrative lead

BULAWAYO (CQ), ZIMBABWE (CQ) – “I never imagined I would be absent for my mother’s burial,” says Isabelle Nyathi (CQ_source sheet) as she narrates how she failed to travel to South Africa (CQ_LINK) in June (CQ) last year to bury her mother who succumbed to Covid 19. (CQ_LINK) (CQ_Nyathi)

At the time, Zimbabwe, (CQ) South Africa (CQ) and most of the world were on covid 19 lockdown restrictions and travel was banned. (CQ_reporter)

“As the eldest child in the family, it was heartbreaking that I could not be present to bury my mother,” she says. “Traditionally, I was supposed to be present to choose my mother’s favorite clothes she was going to be buried in.” (CQ_Nyathi)

Nyathi, (CQ) is a single mother to a 14-year-old boy (CQ_Nyathi) and is employed as a nurse (CQ_Nyathi) at Mpilo Central Hospital, (CQ_LINK) one of Bulawayo’s major hospitals. (CQ_reporter)

A mild consolation, Nyathi (CQ) travelled to South Africa (CQ) in November. (CQ)

She visited her mother’s grave and did a tradition known in Ndebele as ‘ukuphosa ilitshe’ (throwing a stone on the grave), a tradition done by one who missed the funeral. (CQ_Nyathi) (CQ_traditionalist, Sibanda)

“I risked travelling to South Africa (CQ) to go see where my mother was buried and do the tradition of throwing a stone on the grave, as a farewell, since I missed the funeral,” says Nyathi. (CQ_Nyathi)

The single mother says it gave her some comfort, knowing where the body of her mother lies. However, she regrets that other post burial traditions will not be done because her mother lies in a foreign land. (CQ_Nyathi)

Post burial traditions, such as 'umbuyiso' (bringing the deceased' spirit back home, to guide the living) are easier done when the body lies where the deceased's original home is and where most of the family members are based. (CQ_Nyathi).

News Value

The covid induced crowd limitation and other restrictions has resulted in improvisation of funeral traditional practices such as burial and memorial ceremonies, that cultural experts say will further dilute and most likely erode Zimbabwean traditional culture which have already been watered down due to Western influence and trends.

On 10 January 2021, the Zimbabwean government announced that with immediate effect people will be buried in the areas they die in. There will be no movement of bodies across city lines for burial purposes, as a means of curtailing the spread of Covid 19.

It however on the 12th of Januaury made a climbdown and allowed movement "as long as prescribed Covid 19 health regulations are followed."

Background/Context

In indigenous African traditions, rituals in the Ndebele and Shona traditions are performed as a way of expressing emotion. (CQ_LINK, page 54). Rituals are also a way of defining one's identity and enforcing collective identity among tribes.

Traditional rituals are done at different times, intervals and places depending on various cultures and traditions. In the Shona culture death is seen as 'the separation of the body and soul.' (CQ_LINK, page 56). The soul is believed it continues surviving as a spirit.

In the Shona and Ndebele traditions there are several funeral, present and post burial rites that are carried out by the family of the deceased.

Local Voices

In the Ndebele (CQ_LINK) and Shona (CQ_LINK) traditions, funeral wakes are important as they are a source of comfort for the grieving family.

Funeral wakes can go on for a week or more. During this time, friends and relatives visit the bereaved family every day to spend time and have

prayers. In some instances, people spend days with the family until after the burial. (CQ_Dlamini_traditionalist)

Sethu Dlamini, (CQ_source sheet) a self-employed tailor (CQ_Dlamini) and a mother of two girls (CQ_Dlamini) says her father's funeral wake was lonely and quiet due to Covid 19 (CQ) restrictions.

"When my father passed on due to cancer last month, it was a very lonely time as there was no funeral wake," she says. (CQ_Dlamini)

Dlamini (CQ) says her father was well known philanthropist in their neighborhood and he also would have wanted a good send off, with friends and neighbors celebrating his life.

After the burial, friends and family traditionally go back and have some lunch at the home of the bereaved. At the gate of the home, a cleansing ritual is done whereby people who went to the cemetery wash their hands. (CQ_traditionalist_Sibanda)

This cleansing ritual is believed to remove any cemetery and grave dirt and spirits. (CQ_Sibanda)

"This particular tradition only became more pronounced and effective during Covid 19 (CQ)," says Thomas Sithole, (CQ_source sheet) a civic society activist. (CQ_Sithole) "There will already be few people present and they will make sure they wash their hands, as part of the Covid 19 (CQ) guidelines." (CQ_Sithole)

Traditionalist/Expert

"People are cutting the traditional practices short," Prince Sibanda, (CQ_source sheet) secretary for education (CQ_Sibanda) of Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association, ZINATHA. (CQ_LINK) (CQ_sourcesheet)

"For instance, one's mother is supposed to lead the funeral convoy, as she brought him int the world and she will lead him to his final resting place. In our culture anyone who is respected as the mother can assume this role, however crowd restrictions have made people select the closest members, thus ruling out some of these practices as some might not be able to attend the funeral." (CQ_Sibanda)

Sibanda (CQ) added that prior to the pandemic and restrictions to curtail the spread, traditionally bodies would be transported to their homes, where all relatives would gather and spend one last night with the deceased body in the house, singing songs and dancing. (CQ_Sibanda)

This was done as a way of bidding farewell to the deceased and allowing them to spend one more night in their home surrounded by their loved ones. This was also done to sever the tie between the deceased and the living, for closure. (CQ_Sibanda)

“In the past months, we have dealt with reports of angered spirits expressing their dissatisfaction over how they were buried during this pandemic,” says Sibanda. (CQ) “Some have come to ZINATHA(CQ) seeking counsel as they are dealing with angry spirits who feel they have been disrespected in the way they were buried – which is not according to our traditional culture.” (CQ_Sibanda)

Way forward

“Going back to our full cultural practices will likely never happen unless chiefs and custodians of our traditional culture make a serious effort to re-educate the younger generations after the pandemic has been reigned in,” says Sibanda. (CQ) (CQ_Sibanda)

Fortune Moyo translated some of the interviews from Ndebele

Kudzai Mazwarirofa translated some of the interviews from Shona.